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American School
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SYMMETRY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN RELIEF
SCULPTURE

WHAT considerations determined the choice and arrangement of the subjects selected by the early Christians for representation in relief sculpture? The present paper aims to throw some light upon this much-discussed question by calling attention to the important influence exercised over the sculptors by a desire to secure a merely external symmetry and balance of the component elements of groups or of single figures, and by a desire to select themes appropriate to the shape and size of the field at their disposal.

The discussion will be confined almost entirely to the sarcophagi, since these form by far the largest part of the extant monuments of early Christian relief sculpture.

The attempt to secure symmetry and balance is evident (I) in the disposition of the relief fields; (II) in the composition of the special groups and single figures; (III) in the distribution of the figures and groups upon the relief field.

I

The simplest ornamentation of the sarcophagi—one often employed by both Christians and pagans—is the so-called strigilation, a series of S-shaped flutings vertically crossing the face of the sarcophagus. True to the taste for symmetry, the sculptor so disposes the ornamentation that the direction of the S-curves in the right and left halves of the field is reversed. By causing the upper curves to open toward the centre, he secures a rather broad lenticular field just above the

central point of the sarcophagus face. The first step¹ toward a more complex system of ornamentation consists in the introduction of a relief into this lenticular field. This relief usually represents the Good Shepherd or an *orans*—a figure *en face* with arms outstretched in attitude of prayer (see Garrucci, *Storia dell' Arte Cristiana*, vol. V, pl. 375, fig. 2²). In other cases a regular,³ rectangular field of varying size and bordered by a simple moulding,⁴ is substituted for this lenticular field. The remainder of the face of the sarcophagus is then symmetrically decorated. The central panel, though sometimes reserved for the epitaph, usually bears an unpretentious relief, such as the Good Shepherd,⁵ an *orans*,⁶ a biblical scene, *e.g.* the Nativity,⁷ Christ alone or attended by disciples,⁸ the denial of Peter,⁹ a liturgical scene (a husband and wife alone or in the presence of Juno Pronuba¹⁰). In other cases the upper half of this panel is occupied by an *imago clypeata*, and the lower half by a plate for the epitaph,¹¹ by a conventional design¹² or by a pastoral¹³ or biblical¹⁴ scene. Of the terminal decorations the simplest forms are plain mouldings,¹⁵ columns, or pilasters;¹⁶ the last two suggest the original house-form of the sarcophagus. A variant form consists in a tall and narrow rectangular field bearing a relief-representation of a genius with an inverted torch, the figures at both ends being the same, but with attitudes reversed.¹⁷ This field is not infrequently still further enlarged and adorned with

¹ *i.e.* in complexity, not in chronological development.

² Hereafter citations from vol. V of Garrucci's work will be given thus: G. 375, 2.

³ An exception is G. 295, 2.

⁴ Sometimes separated from the strigilation by fluted pilasters or columns (G. 295, 1; 325, 4; 362, 3).

⁵ G. 295, 1, 2; 300, 1; 301, 1; 303.

⁶ G. 373, 4, 5; 374, 1, 2; 375, 1, 2, 4; 403, 2; 377, 4; 378, 1; 380, 1. In the last three instances the *orans* forms one of a symmetrical group of three figures.

⁷ G. 310, 4.

⁸ G. 329, 3; 330, 1, 2; 342, 2.

⁹ G. 316, 4.

¹⁰ G. 325, 4; 327, 1; 361, 1; 362, 3; 368, 3.

¹¹ G. 358, 2.

¹² G. 357, 3; 360, 2.

¹³ G. 359, 2; 363, 1-3; 366, 1.

¹⁴ G. 357, 1, 2, 4.

¹⁵ G. 298, 2; 342, 2.

¹⁶ G. 295, 1; 300, 2-4; 301, 1, 3-5; 306, 1-4; 380, 1.

¹⁷ G. 297, 1, 2; 403, 1.

other single figures or groups, such as a lion attacking a deer,¹ Cupid and Psyche,² a human figure,³ an *orans* or Good Shepherd,⁴ or a sheep near a tree.⁵ In all these instances there is a close correspondence between the figures at the right and left, either in external form or in content, or in both. When we pass from this range of scenes to the biblical scenes, the correspondence becomes less conspicuous, although instances are not wanting which show an effort on the part of the sculptor to break with tradition and alter the composition of the established subjects, so as to render them more appropriate in form to the new conditions. Desire to secure symmetry seems to have played some part also in the choice of subjects. Thus the most frequently recurring scenes are those from the life of Moses,⁶ representations of resurrections,⁷ the sacrifice of Isaac,⁸ all of which are especially easy to adjust to the requirements of a terminal position.⁹

A more complex system of decoration arises when each terminal panel is divided by horizontal mouldings into two equal fields.¹⁰ A still more complex system is seen when the strigilated field is subdivided vertically as well as horizontally, so as to exhibit two pairs of superposed panels. In such cases the central and terminal figured reliefs are sometimes also subdivided into superposed compositions,¹¹ and sometimes more satisfactorily left undivided.¹² These subdivided terminal panels exhibit biblical subjects only. Occasionally, between terminal reliefs the strigilation is omitted and a figured composition substituted.¹³

¹ G. 357, 3; 383, 2.

² G. 357, 1.

³ G. 307, 4; 363, 3.

⁴ G. 358, 2; 360, 2; 370, 4.

⁵ G. 300, 1.

⁶ The striking of the rock (G. 357, 2; 359, 2; 361, 1; 366, 1; 374, 2; 375, 1), the receiving of the tablets of the Law (357, 2; 366, 1).

⁷ G. 361, 1; 364, 1.

⁸ G. 310, 4.

⁹ The representations of Lazarus and of Moses striking the rock may thus be adjusted by shifting the tomb of Lazarus or the rock to the left or to the right side of the composition, thus causing the figures of Christ and of Moses to face in a different direction.

¹⁰ G. 364, 1.

¹¹ G. 361, 1; 399, 1, 2, 7.

¹² G. 324, 4.

¹³ G. 308, (from Trèves).

An important type of Christian sarcophagus¹ is that which has the form of a peripteral temple. There is usually an odd number of intercolumniations along the front, one in the centre and two to four at each side, with alternating round and pointed arches. Each intercolumniation is occupied by a figure or a group; the correspondence in form between these being often not less striking than that between the architecturally formed fields they adorn² (see Fig. 1).



FIGURE 1.—CHRISTIAN SARCOPHAGUS IN THE LATERAN MUSEUM, ROME.

There is no Christian sarcophagus bearing on its face more than one field of reliefs that does not show a symmetrical disposition of the fields, and few that show a neglect of symmetry in the composition of the groups that fill them.

II

Passing to the consideration of the special groups and single figures, we have first to note a striking contrast between Christian and pagan relief sculpture. While the pagan artist usually filled his field with one scene, the Christian sculptor almost invariably placed upon the sarcophagus face a series of from four to fifteen different scenes.³ In this method of pro-

¹ One often used by the pagans also.

² G. 321, 1-4 ; 322, 2 ; 361, 2.

³ The only important exceptions are (1) the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, represented on several Gallic and on one Roman sarcophagus, and (2) Christ attended by his disciples.

cedure, however, he was not an innovator. The pagan sarcophagi also show a tendency to break up a group into a number of elements, as in the representations of Endymion¹ and of Venus and Adonis.² We find also in pagan reliefs separate scenes standing side by side. The well-known sarcophagus of the 'Mourners' from Sidon affords a close parallel to the Christian representations of Christ sitting with his disciples. In these instances there is generally some inner connection between the scenes, these being usually scenes from the life of some individual.³ The Christian sarcophagi, however, so far as has yet been demonstrated, aside from a few examples,⁴ show no such bond of union.⁵

Furthermore the early Christians confined themselves to a rather limited range of subjects,⁶ and thus repeated again and again the same scene. This tendency to repetition is not peculiar to Christian sculpture. To mention only a few conspicuous examples from pagan art: Robert in *Die antiken Sarkophag-Reliefs*, vol. III, cites over fifty existing sarcophagi bearing representations of Endymion and Selene, which, though divided by him into three classes, show in reality only slight variations from each other. The same volume contains plates illustrating forty-six sarcophagi bearing representations of the labors of Hercules. Of these thirty-one represent the twelve labors and show the same lack of variety and the same tenacity in clinging to traditional types as do the Christian sarcophagi.

¹ See Robert, *Die antiken Sarkophag-Reliefs*, III, pls. 12-25.

² Robert, *op. cit.* III, pls. 2-5.

³ Examples are the scenes from the lives of Iphigenia and Orestes (Robert, *op. cit.* II, pls. 57-59), and from the life of Hercules (Robert, *op. cit.* III, pls. 27-43).

⁴ *E.g.* scenes from the life of Susannah on a Gallic sarcophagus (G. 377, 3).

⁵ Schultze, *Archaeologische Studien, passim*, urges the importance of the idea of the resurrection in this connection. Other attempts to find a unifying idea are mentioned below (p. 144 f.).

⁶ The number and variety of subjects is really larger than is usually realized. Over seventy-five scenes from the Old and New Testaments occur, several of them in two or three different forms. If we add to these the symbolical and liturgical scenes, and the scenes borrowed from pagan art, the number rises above 150 (cf. Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, I, pp. 91-222).

Examining these subjects in detail, we note that the symmetrical arrangement of parts is strikingly prominent in the following single figures and groups :

(1) *The orans*. The symmetry of the figure is complete.

(2) *The Good Shepherd*. The most frequent type is that in which the Shepherd appears in the attitude of the classical *kriophoros*, that is, carrying a sheep across his shoulders. At his feet stand two other sheep, one at each side. They usually face him and stand in perfectly symmetrical attitudes and positions; or, if not facing him, their heads are turned toward him. If four, six, or eight sheep surround him, they are divided into equal groups at his right and left. A tree at the right and one at the left often close the scene.

(3) *Daniel in the lions' den*. This theme is subject to fewer variations than almost any other. Daniel is represented nude,¹ standing with arms outstretched in the attitude of an *orans*. At each side stands a lion facing² him. On the sarcophagi he is sometimes alone, sometimes attended by Habakkuk and other persons. In the frescoes he is always represented alone. The lions³ occupy symmetrical positions except in extremely rare instances. They sometimes stand or lie, but most frequently sit on their haunches, thus imparting to the composition a distinctly pyramidal form. When two persons attend the prophet, they stand at the right and left, one behind each lion. In a few instances only is a third attendant added.

(4) *Christ attended by disciples*. In these scenes, which ordinarily occupy the entire face of the sarcophagus, either in a single field or in a succession of intercolumniations, Christ uniformly occupies the centre, either seated or standing upon a rock from which flow the four streams of Paradise. The dis-

¹ He is rarely clothed (see Kraus, *Real-Encyclopädie der christlichen Alterthümer*, s.v. Daniel; Hennecke, *Altchristliche Malerei und altchristliche Literatur*, p. 57).

² In a few instances turned from him (see Hennecke, *l.c.*).

³ Two in number. A single exception (G. 301, 3) has only one lion; yet even here a symmetrical effect is secured.

ciples (two, four, six, ten, or twelve in number—in one instance there are twenty-four persons represented) sit or stand, an equal number at each side of the central figure. In the attitudes and the grouping of these figures the tendency is to balance group with group or figure with figure, to the right and left of the centre. Particularly noticeable in this respect is a Gallic sarcophagus.¹ In the accessories also, *e.g.* a palm tree at each side of Christ, a man and a woman kneeling at the right and left below Him, or two deer drinking from the streams, a strict symmetry of position and attitude is preserved.²

(5) *Representations of the temptation and transgression of Adam and Eve.* Like most of the other groups composed by the early Christians it contains but few elements. The two parents, nude, stand *en face* on each side of the Tree of Life, about which a serpent is sometimes coiled. The strict symmetry of the group is broken only by the position of the arms and (though less frequently) by the sheaf of grain and the sheep which accompany them as symbols of the fields of labor to which they are respectively condemned. In many instances the arms also are symmetrically placed; both being held before them or one being extended toward the tree. In the frescoes the tree also is treated with a symmetry almost geometrical, sending out, for example, in one case, two branches from one side, which correspond exactly in form, size, and position to two others on the opposite side.³ The fuller treatment of the tree in the frescoes is due not only to the greater ease with which they were produced, but also to the larger field at the disposal of the painter, as is shown by the fact that the group receives a similar fuller treatment in the sarcophagi, when it is sculptured upon the cover or one of the small sides, positions which are favorable to the lateral expansion of the scene.⁴

¹ Le Blant, *Étude sur les sarcophages chrétiens antiques de la ville d'Arles*, pl. iv.

² Cf. Schnaase, *Geschichte der bildenden Künste*, III², p. 91.

³ Garrucci, vol. II, pl. 63.

⁴ Cf. below, pp. 144 f.

When the sheep and the sheaf are present, they are employed to fill in the spaces at each side of the foot of the tree.¹

(6) *The condemnation of Adam and Eve.* Christ, the Λόγος, stands *en face* between the two. Eve is generally at his left, as usually in the preceding group. Christ holds in his right hand a sheaf of grain, in his left he holds a lamb by the fore feet. The group is composed with almost exact symmetry, extending frequently even to the positions of the hands of Adam and Eve.²

(7) On one sarcophagus is a representation of the offerings of Cain and Abel modelled closely upon the preceding group.³

(8) *The multiplication of the loaves and fishes.* In the treatment of this miracle the frescoes and the sarcophagi present marked divergencies. In the frescoes Christ is unattended by other figures.⁴ Near him stand seven baskets of loaves, one of which he touches with a wand. On the sarcophagi Christ is represented standing between two men, each of whom holds a plate with both hands. On the plate at the right are two fishes, on the other are loaves of bread. Christ extends his hands and touches the loaves and fishes. Deviations from this symmetrical type⁵ are usually explainable on technical grounds.

(9) A scene composed strictly on the model of the preceding and explained as Isaac blessing Jacob and Esau.

(10) *The labarum*, at the base of which sit two soldiers in full armor. The *labarum* is often made the centre of groups similar to (4). The arrangement is in all cases strictly symmetrical.

The following groups betray less clearly the influence of a desire to secure symmetry :

(11) *The arrest of Moses, Peter, or Christ.* Each shoulder of the person arrested is seized by an officer. The energy of action — quite unusual in early Christian sculpture — that char-

¹ Illustrations of this group in G. *passim*, in particular 333, 3; 372, 3; 377, 1.

² G. *passim*, in particular 367, 2, 3.

³ G. 310, 2.

⁴ The only exception is G. vol. II, pl. 18, 3; yet here the scene is symmetrical.

⁵ G. 320, 1.

acterizes this scene, serves to break somewhat the formal monotony which it would otherwise have and which would give it much the same form as that assumed by the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

(12) The denial of Peter.¹

(13) Christ and the woman of Samaria.²

These subjects, except Nos. 7, 9, 12, 13, are among those of most frequent occurrence in the early Christian art, there being but few sculptured sarcophagi that do not contain one or more of them. Those which show the most striking symmetry — Adam and Eve, Daniel, the Good Shepherd, and the *orantes* — are among the earliest themes chosen for representation by the Christians, and are found with great frequency in frescoes. The multiplication of the loaves, on the other hand, first finds a symmetrical representation in the relief sculpture. The arrest of Moses was developed out of the representation of the striking of the rock,³ and the arrest of Peter and of Christ are formed upon its model.

III

As stated above, the Christian sculptor usually filled the field with reliefs representing, not a single scene, but a series of from four to fifteen different scenes. In the distribution of these scenes over the surfaces of sarcophagi, we find not less striking evidence of a tendency to symmetrical arrangement and balance combined with an effort to adjust the given group to the form or the division of the field in which it finds its place.

As in the examination of the sarcophagi bearing simple ornamentation we found the centre to be the chief point of interest, so on the more elaborately decorated sarcophagi the centre receives in all but a few instances a strong emphasis. This is particularly true of the representations of Christ surrounded by his disciples. Although the scene often fills the

¹ G. 316, 4; 323, 5; 334, 1, 3.

² G. 319, 1; 333, 1; 334, 1.

³ Schultze, *op. cit.* p. 167.

entire face and both small sides of the sarcophagus, yet, on the other hand, it is often reduced until only one or two attendants are left at each side. In this case the group loses much of its independent value, and becomes a mere central group on a par with those surrounding it. It is then still further simplified by a substitution of the *labarum* for the figure of Christ, and in this form frequently occupies the middle one of a series of intercolumniations.¹

Next to this type that which occurs most frequently as a central figure is the *orans*. Its independence as a central element is often formally indicated by its separation from the adjacent groups, either by a field left free from reliefs,² by two columns,³ or by two trees.⁴ The same effect is secured by setting the figure before a *parapetasma*.⁵ Not infrequently two men stand at the right and left in corresponding attitudes. In a few instances — reliefs of very poor execution — the figure is somewhat confused with the adjacent groups.⁶

The Good Shepherd when employed as a central figure is not often associated with biblical scenes. An instance of such a grouping is afforded by a Gallic sarcophagus.⁷ The subject is more frequently found filling a central panel,⁸ and once has a place within the central intercolumniation of a series of five, the other four being filled by the four Horae.

Of the New Testament miracles, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, which received the most symmetrical treatment, has, in several instances, been employed as a central group.⁹

The Samaritan woman at the well occurs as the central group on a sarcophagus found in Rome.¹⁰

Daniel between the lions was used more frequently as a central element than any other Old Testament theme. Thus

¹ G. 335, 2-4 ; 350, 1, 2.

² G. 377, 1.

³ G. 369, 1, 3.

⁴ G. 378, 4.

⁵ G. 369, 2; 376, 1; 380, 3.

⁶ G. 382, 2.

⁷ Le Blant, *l.c.*

⁸ Cf. p. 127.

⁹ G. 312, 1, 3; 313, 1, 2; and in a slightly varied form, 312, 2.

¹⁰ G. 313, 3.

placed it occurs four times below the *imago clypeata*,¹ and three times on covers.²

Adam and Eve form the central group on one relief,³ and on another,⁴ Cain and Abel bringing their offerings.

It is noticeable that the subjects which from preference are given a central position on the sarcophagi are precisely those which in the above examination of the special scenes have been found to be symmetrical in composition.

Although the number of different subjects employed as central elements is small, yet these find such frequent application that a very large proportion of the extant sarcophagi show them.⁵ The prominence of the central element is in fact so marked that Garrucci determined the succession of the illustrations in his *Storia dell' Arte Cristiana* almost exclusively on this basis.

In the selection of the subjects for representation at each end of the sarcophagus face, the desire to secure symmetry, together with a fitting termination, is not less evident than in the case of the central group. This is the more surprising because the great majority of the subjects employed by the early Christians contain or consist of standing figures, any of which might have been used as terminal elements without seriously detracting from the artistic finish of the composition as a whole. The monotony, however, produced by a long line of standing figures has led the sculptors to vary the series at the ends.

The following scenes⁶ are used in preference to others as terminal⁷ groups. The number of occurrences of each subject is here given.

¹ G. 364, 3; 365, 2; 367, 1, 2.

² G. 384, 2, 5; 398, 4.

³ G. 310, 1.

⁴ G. 310, 2.

⁵ The exceptions are: G. 313, 4; 314, 5, 6; 316, 3; 318, 1 (?), 4 (?); 361, 2; 371, 1; 372, 2 (?); 377, 3.

⁶ Several have already been cited by Le Blant, *op. cit.* p. xiii.

⁷ Counting also as terminal positions those on each side of the *imago clypeata*. Sarcophagi with arcades are also included contrary to the precedent set by Le Blant, *l.c.*, since these show even more clearly than the ordinary type an effort to balance the corresponding scenes right and left of the centre.

(1)	Resurrection of Lazarus	25
(2)	Resurrections of other persons	9
(3)	Vision of Ezekiel	1
(4)	Sacrifice of Isaac	29
(5)	Moses striking the rock	25
(6)	Moses receiving the law	19
(7)	Adoration of the Magi ¹	10
(8)	Handwashing of Pilate ¹	9
(9)	Job and his friends ¹	5
(10)	Offerings of Cain and Abel ¹	4
(11)	Washing of Peter's feet ¹	3
(12, 13)	Man reading, A person seated (2 each) ¹	4
(14)	Slaughter of the innocents ¹	1
(15, 16)	Saul, Stoning of Stephen (1 each)	2
(17)	Creation of Adam and Eve	1
(18)	A royal personage seated	1
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The following subjects, though not especially suited for use as terminal elements, occur as such:

Three Babylonians before Nebuchadnezzar	6
Miracle of the loaves and fishes	6
The Haemorroessa, Paralytic, Blind, Daniel destroying the serpent (5 each)	20
Adam and Eve, Peter receiving the keys (4 each)	8
Story of Jonah, Denial of Peter (3 each)	6
Moses and the burning bush, Daniel between the lions (2 each)	4
Miracle of Cana, an <i>orans</i> , Baptism of Christ (2 each)	6
Miscellaneous scenes (1 each)	14
	<hr/> 70

The most common instance of the balancing of similar terminal groups is that of Moses striking the rock and the resurrection of Lazarus. The subjects Moses receiving the law and the Sacrifice of Isaac are frequently found at each side of the *imago clypeata*. In these scenes the hand of God appearing in the clouds is made to fill the triangular space between the upper moulding of the sarcophagus face and the rim of the 'clypeus.'² The frequent recurrence of the first two scenes

¹ Each of these scenes has a seated figure at the end of it.

² Le Blant, *op. cit.*

in connection with each other is used by Kraus¹ as evidence for substantiating the theory that the sculptor desired to symbolize in them the Old Testament type and its fulfilment in the New ('Typus und Erfüllung des Typus'). Le Blant, however, in the passage cited above seems to come nearer the truth, when he says that the desire mentioned above to provide a suitable terminal element for the series of reliefs guided the artist in the choice of these subjects.² Schultze³ calls attention to the 'unmittelbare Verbindung' or 'Inbeziehungsetzen' of these two groups, in commenting on the frescoes of *cubiculum* B in the catacombs of St. Callixtus. When scenes representing resurrections other than that of Lazarus⁴ occur as terminal elements, they are probably so used because of confusion with it. The position of the scenes of Moses receiving the law and the Sacrifice of Isaac at the close of a series of reliefs on each side of the *imago clypeata* led to their employment as terminal elements at the ends of the sarcophagus face as well. The subjects 7-14 in the above list are rendered suitable by the fact that the seated figure in each may easily be made to occupy a position at the end of the sarcophagus face and turned toward the centre. The eighteen subjects in the first list occur in the great majority of cases in final positions; the twenty-nine⁵ in the second list occupy these positions a relatively small number of times. For example, the miracles of Christ, although they belong to the most common themes of early Christian art,⁶ occur only two to six times each as terminal elements.

Besides using biblical scenes for this purpose the Christians

¹ *Real-Encyclopädie der christlichen Alterthümer*, II, p. 431.

² That which renders these two scenes suitable for the position is that the tomb of Lazarus in the one, and the rock with the stream of water in the other, are solid vertical masses having the effect of a pilaster or column.

³ *Op. cit.* p. 39.

⁴ Regarding as resurrections of Lazarus only those scenes having an *aedicula*-like tomb.

⁵ Except the first and sixth.

⁶ I have noted over four hundred instances on the sarcophagi alone.

sometimes followed the practice of the pagans and chose an architectural form¹ or rocks and vegetation.²

In the disposition of the reliefs lying between the centre and end groups we do not note so marked an effort to secure a balance of lines and forms; yet instances in which this consideration has had its weight are far from uncommon, as the following cases will show: a scene of arrest is balanced with the miracle of the loaves and fishes³ in ten instances.⁴ The Adam and Eve group is balanced with the miracle of the loaves and fishes,⁵ and with Daniel between the lions,⁶ an arrest with an arrest,⁷ the stoning of Paul (?) with Christ led before Pilate,⁸ Peter led to punishment with Christ led before Pilate.⁹ Balancing of double or triple pairs of New or Old Testament scenes which are made to correspond in general also occur;¹⁰ likewise New Testament miracles are balanced with each other.¹¹ An excellent example of symmetrical compositions on a Christian sarcophagus is furnished by a sarcophagus found at Arles.¹²

The covers of the sarcophagi offer a peculiar and somewhat difficult problem to the sculptor. He is called upon to fill a field which is very low in proportion to its length; too low to admit well a standing human figure, and too long for any but a rather extended scene. The pagan sarcophagi show a number of more or less successful attempts to solve the problem. The field is often reduced to less than one-half its former length by inserting the plate for the epitaph in the centre, thus producing two fields for reliefs. Whether thus diminished in length or not, the space is usually filled with scenes that naturally demand but little height, and may be extended indefi-

¹ G. 298, 1 (an arched doorway); 299, 1-3; 300, 2-4; 301, 1, 3-5 (columns or pilasters).

² G. 298, 1; 304, 4.

³ The close resemblance between these groups in external form was mentioned above (p. 133).

⁴ G. 314, 2, 6; 318, 4; 364, 3; 366, 3; 372, 2; 376, 1; 378, 2; 380, 4; 382, 2.

⁵ G. 365, 2.

⁶ G. 301, 3; 322, 2.

⁷ G. 340, 5; 322, 2 (?).

⁸ G. 346, 1.

⁹ G. 335, 2.

¹⁰ G. 321, 3; 366, 2; 370, 1; 379, 1.

¹¹ G. 319, 2; 375, 3 (paralytic and the blind); 320, 1 (the blind and the haemorrhoea); 353, 1; 403, 4 (the haemorrhoea and the centurion); 353, 1 (the blind and the denial of Peter).

¹² G. 361, 2.

nately in length. Such are: (1) a train of sea animals or dolphins,¹ the former often bearing sea nymphs on their backs; (2) a train of captive women in sitting posture;² (3) two sphinxes facing, with vertically compressed bodies;³ (4) a chase;⁴ (5) cupids holding garlands.⁵ Less frequently the required length is secured by representing a series of moments in a myth, as that of Medea in Corinth,⁶ Iphigenia among the Taurians,⁷ or the labors of Hercules.⁸

The Christian sculptors showed themselves no less skilful in dealing with the problem. They had the choice of several methods. They might adopt pagan subjects, reorganize and adjust the distinctively Christian subjects (in case they were inappropriate) to the new conditions, or adopt suitable Christian subjects. As a matter of fact, they resorted to all of these methods. Of the pagan subjects the dolphin was the one most frequently adopted, perhaps because of its association with the fish, the symbol of Christ. Christian compositions were altered by expanding them laterally.⁹ The representations of Adam and Eve and of Daniel between the lions are somewhat capable of lateral expansion and occur several times on covers. The following scenes,¹⁰ all rather long in proportion to their height, find frequent representation on covers: the story of Jonah (19 occurrences), the Nativity (3), the adoration of the Magi (18), the three men in the fiery furnace (6), the same before Nebu-

¹ Robert, *Die antiken Sarkophag-Reliefs*, III, pl. 12, no. 40.

² Robert, *op. cit.* II, pl. 32, nos. 77, 78.

³ Robert, *op. cit.* II, pl. 18, no. 27.

⁴ Robert, *op. cit.* III, pls. 38, 40, nos. 127, 132.

⁵ Robert, *op. cit.* III, pl. 13, no. 48.

⁶ Jason and Creusa, the children bearing the gifts to Creusa, the death of Creusa and Creon, the murder of the children, the flight of Medea (Robert, *op. cit.* II, pl. 62, no. 194).

⁷ The recognition of Iphigenia and Orestes, the carrying of the image of Artemis to the shore, the battle on the shore, the flight of Iphigenia and Orestes (Robert, *op. cit.* II, pl. 54, no. 155).

⁸ Robert, *op. cit.* III, pl. 33, no. 120.

⁹ Good examples are found in Garrucci's work, pl. 383, 5; 384, 2, 4; *et al.*

¹⁰ The list is not complete. The number of omissions, however, does not have any appreciable effect upon the relative proportion of occurrences.

chadnezzar (2), the crossing of the Red Sea and the fall of manna (1), the slaughter of the innocents (1), the twelve apostles (1), the striking of the rock and the arrest of Moses¹ (5). Other groups which do not possess these proportions occur only rarely on covers. Fully seventy per cent of the representations found on covers are of the third kind, subjects adopted as specially appropriate for such a field. These subjects may be divided into two classes. The first class comprises those which are composed of an extended series of seated or standing figures, while the second shows a predominance of horizontal lines.

That it was chiefly a regard for the form of the field that led the sculptors to choose these subjects for cover decorations, is proved by their occurrence in the narrow field below the *imago clypeata* on many sarcophagi,² and in the narrow fields resulting from the distribution of the reliefs on the sarcophagus face into two horizontal bands instead of one.³ Noticeable is also the fact, that many biblical scenes occur rarely on covers, although they frequently appear in other positions on the sarcophagi. Such are the miracles of the Lord and several Old Testament subjects (the sacrifice of Isaac, Adam and Eve).

A similar set of conditions presents itself in the short sides of the sarcophagi. Here the field is usually scarcely long enough to admit the representation of more than one ordinary group of two or three figures without overcrowding.⁴ The sculptors, therefore, in most instances selected single scenes that are either somewhat longer than the ordinary groups or are capable of lateral expansion. The groups most frequently occurring there are: the three men in the fiery furnace (4 times), Adam and Eve (8), the three men before Nebuchadnezzar (4),

¹ The two scenes are so intimately associated that the sculptors seem to have regarded them usually as a single group.

² The adoration: G. 358, 1; 365, 1; Jonah: G. 359, 1; 366, 3; 367, 3; Daniel between the lions: G. 310, 1.

³ Jonah: G. 377, 1; Adoration: G. 365, 2; 377, 1; the three men before Nebuchadnezzar: G. 365, 1.

⁴ The difficulty does not exist in the case of very deep sarcophagi.

Daniel between the lions (4), Adoration of the Magi (2). Others are of less frequent occurrence: Jonah, Job and his friends, Christ's entry into Jerusalem, Tabitha. A remarkable example of the departure of a sculptor from a traditional type is found in the treatment of two subjects (Moses striking the rock, and the baptism of Christ) on the ends of a Gallic sarcophagus,¹ where the composition is entirely changed. Another not less striking instance of an effort to adjust a group to the field is afforded by the treatment of the miracle of the loaves and fishes on another Gallic sarcophagus.² This scene³ does not readily admit of lateral expansion, since Christ must

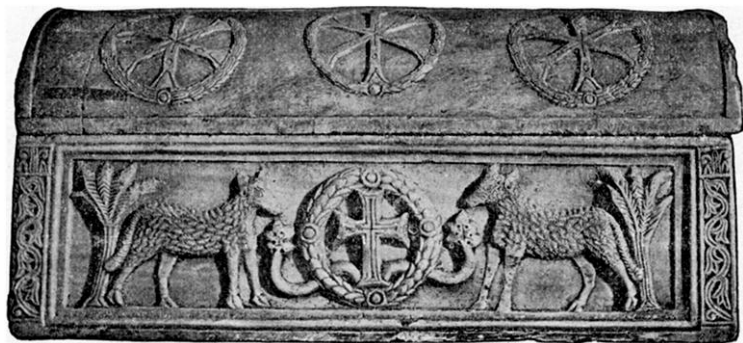


FIGURE 2.—CHRISTIAN SARCOPHAGUS IN S. APOLLINARE IN CLASSE, RAVENNA.

stand quite close to the attendants that he may touch the loaves and fishes. The sculptor of the present sarcophagus, however, in order to fill his field, separated the figures so widely that the Christ is forced to stretch out his arms in a painful manner. A similar unsuccessful attempt to represent a subject inappropriate to a field of a certain shape is observable on the well-known sarcophagus in the Lateran Museum representing the history of Jonah.

In this discussion no account has been taken of a class of sarcophagi, which show exact geometrical symmetry and which are chiefly, though not exclusively, to be found in Ravenna.

¹ G. 398, 9.

² G. 361, 3.

³ Cf. p. 133.

The reliefs are either modifications of the scenes representing Christ with his disciples or symbolic designs composed upon its general plan. In the former case the subordinate figures are reduced to six, four, or two. By placing the figures some distance from each other, and inserting a palm at the right and left, the scene is made to occupy the entire field. In the latter case the place of Christ is occupied by a lamb standing upon the Hill of Paradise, by a cross, or by the monogram of Christ within a circle (Fig. 2). Instead of the apostles, a lamb or a peacock stands at each side. In a few instances the centre is occupied by a vase from which the two peacocks drink. The field is not infrequently filled with a network of vines; these show an exact correspondence in form at the right and left of the centre.

IV

The preceding discussion has shown that the Christian sculptors, besides following in many cases the traditions of the pagan ateliers, were influenced (1) by a desire to secure a formal symmetry in the composition of the special scenes, (2) by a desire to secure a symmetrical arrangement of these groups on the relief field (*a*) by strongly emphasizing the centre, (*b*) by providing mutually corresponding terminal elements, (*c*) by disposing the intermediate subjects in mutually corresponding groups, and (3) by a desire to choose (or render) subjects appropriate to the shape and size of the field at their disposal.

These tendencies are not confined to or characteristic of any one geographical district. They are found in Gaul, Italy, Spain, and Numidia, although, as stated above, sarcophagi of a certain type occur most numerous in Ravenna. Neither can the chronological development of the tendencies be clearly made out, owing to the small number of monuments that can be accurately dated.

The principles here established are of great importance for the interpretation of the monuments of early Christian art.

Although they have occasionally been referred to by various writers,¹ and somewhat superficially and briefly discussed by Schnaase,² their influence has been overlooked by a class of archaeologists who lay great stress on the symbolic or allegorical interpretation of the remains of early Christian art. Several passages of recent scholars demand reconsideration on the basis of these principles. Garrucci,³ whose deductions often bear a strongly subjective character, makes the following statement regarding the bond of relationship connecting the various groups represented on a given sarcophagus: "Gli antichi artisti cristiani aver dovevano una ragione che regolava la scelta dei soggetti, da loro scolpiti sulla faccia di un sarcofago, o sopra alcuna volta cimiteriale, o intorno ad una nicchia di arcosolio; questo concetto dominante, questa idea superiore, che non era il semplice fatto, vestir doveva il carattere medesimo, che le particolari rappresentanze, le quale se non sono figurate in istorico senso, un altro certamente ne hanno, che profetico, dommatico ovvero morale si appella; e come le riunioni di soggetti in senso storico si seguono l' una l' altra, senz' altra ragione che la successione dei fatti, così le unioni in senso figurato star debbono insieme per quel concetto superiore che ha preseduto nella mente dell' artista alla loro scelta, e che è dovere del interprete andar cercando." De Waal further carries out the idea as follows:⁴ "In der That haben denn de Rossi, Garrucci u. A. für einzelne Sarcophagen die tiefere einheitliche Idee, welche der Wahl und Anordnung der Bilder zu Grunde liegt, nachgewiesen; wir glauben, dass sie sich durchgängig wenigstens bei den bessern Arbeiten nachweisen lasse, . . ." The judgments passed by Garrucci and De Waal are based mainly on the examination of the well-known sarcophagus from S. Paolo fuori le Mura, which now stands in the Lateran Museum. The correctness of their interpretation of this

¹ Cf. Schultze, *Archaeologische Studien*, p. 42, who in this connection cites Costadoni, *Il pesce simbolico*.

² *Geschichte der bildenden Künste*, 2d ed. One passage is cited below.

³ *Op. cit.* vol. I, pp. 45 ff.

⁴ In Kraus, *Real-Encyclopädie der christlichen Alterthümer*, II, p. 725.

monument is, to say the least, rendered very uncertain by Schultze,¹ who proposes quite a different explanation.

It is much more than doubtful that, as Garrucci and De Waal claim, the disposition of the subjects upon the sarcophagi was determined by the content ('concrete dominante,' 'idea superiore,' 'tiefere einheitliche Idee'), and that they are to be read off like a homily ('omilia'). Garrucci begins with the assumption that the Christians followed pagan tradition in the disposition of the scenes. There is nothing improbable in this statement. That the pagans, however, always or even usually followed the historical order of events is by no means true; an examination of the sarcophagi published in volumes II and III of Robert's work shows that they were frequently uninfluenced by the historical order of events. An instance is the sarcophagus cover bearing reliefs illustrating the life of Oedipus.² It is not impossible, perhaps not improbable, that in some instances the Christians were more influenced by the idea than by the form,³ but that the considerations discussed above played an important, if not the chief part, is shown by the fact that sixty per cent of the reliefs⁴ occurring on Christian sarcophagi have had their choice, composition, or arrangement determined by such motives. This large percentage further shows that Schultze⁵ has gone too far toward the opposite extreme. 'Künstlerische Motive' which have affected nearly

¹ *Op. cit.* pp. 145 ff.

² Vol. II, pl. 60, no. 183.

³ Professor Marucchi stated to the writer that the sarcophagus from S. Paolo was probably the only one which gave evidence of a consideration of the content in the arrangement.

⁴ Leaving out of account the large class described on p. 143.

⁵ *Op. cit.* pp. 173 ff.: "Der Komplex von Sarcophag-Reliefs, über den wir verfügen, lehrt übereinstimmend, das die Künstler sich fast ausnahmslos darauf beschränkten, aus den vorhandenen Besitzstücken eine bestimmte Zahl auszuwählen und diese gegebenen Sujets, ohne Rücksicht auf eine bestimmte einheitliche Idee oder einen fortlaufenden Gedanken, einfach mechanisch aneinander zu ordnen. Sogar künstlerische Motive scheinen nur selten massgebend geworden zu sein; der Vergleich der einzelnen Gruppen mit einander erregt vielmehr die Vermuthung, dass allein das Streben nach Variation diese oder jene Bilderfolge geschaffen habe, deren Gedankenreihe die Ausleger beharrlich und in bester Überzeugung zu erkennen sich abmühen."

two-thirds of the entire number of our extant monuments can scarcely be described as being 'of infrequent occurrence' ('nur selten'). The passage from Schnaase mentioned above reads as follows:¹ "Sie (*i.e.* the subjects represented on sarcophagi) sind immer in ungerader Zahl, das mittlere Bildwerk gewöhnlich etwas breiter und voller, so dass es sich als die mitte auszeichnet, während die beiden nächsten und dann wieder die beiden entfernteren mit einander correspondieren, und zwar nicht durch ihren Inhalt, der vielmehr dabei gar nicht berücksichtigt zu sein scheint, sondern durch ihre Form." The words 'immer' and 'gewöhnlich' do not correctly describe the facts. The clause 'während . . . correspondieren' should be essentially modified in the light of the facts stated on p. 139. It has not been proved that *no* consideration was had for content in choosing the subjects. On the contrary, instances can be cited where it has entered into the question.²

Although, in the treatment of the sarcophagi, the sculptors often followed certain traditional modes of procedure in regard to the principles discussed in this paper, yet the application or non-application of these principles in special cases seems to have depended largely upon the choice of the artist, since some sarcophagi show no effort to apply them, besides offering in other respects noticeable exceptions to the usual mode of procedure. The arrest of Moses, for example, is regularly placed next to the striking of the rock, yet in two instances it is separated from it.³ Once the striking of the rock is not placed at the end.⁴ The composition of the scene is entirely changed in two cases.⁵ The *orans* is occasionally placed out of the centre.⁶ On two sarcophagi⁷ the composition is in striking contrast with the usual forms.

It remains only to draw a brief comparison between classical and Christian sculpture. Symmetrical balancing of forms and

¹ *Op. cit.* III, p. 90.

² G. 335, 2, 3, 4; 341, 4; 377, 3.

³ G. 378, 2; 377, 1.

⁴ G. 314, 6.

⁵ G. 351, 6; 367, 2.

⁶ G. 312, 3; 370, 2; 371, 2; 377, 3; cf. 371, 1.

⁷ G. 374, 4; and the well-known one in the Lateran bearing scenes from the life of Jonah.

masses has been noted by many writers¹ as a prominent characteristic of the Greek and Graeco-Roman art in all periods of its development. An important change, however, takes place in its nature in the course of centuries. The Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries before the Christian era display a very delicate refinement in this respect. With them it is always subordinate to the idea. As the creative imagination grew weaker, and form gained in importance, the symmetry in the composition of works of art either became more and more formal or was entirely neglected. In many instances being made an end in itself, it becomes painfully conspicuous. The Christian sculptors, who belong to the last period in the development of ancient art, following the general tendencies of their times, show only mediocre skill or in many instances total lack of it, and their efforts often result in an almost mathematical exactness or in great crudeness. This fact renders more conspicuous the presence of the influence of symmetry in Christian art, and so not only gives greater weight to the evidence cited in this paper, but incidentally exemplifies a truth often lost sight of or neglected by specialists in Christian archaeology: namely, that in the interpretation of the monuments we must in all instances take into consideration the intimate dependence of Christian upon pagan art.

C. L. MEADER.

¹ e.g. De Cou, *Am. J. Arch.*, First series, vol. VIII, pls. ii, iii.